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## A NOTE ON THE TERM "SOCIAL EVOLUTION."

WRITERS on society, when they speak of social evolution mean something more than what Mr. Hobson, in his review of Kidd's *Social Evolution* in the November number of this JOURNAL called the verbal proposition that the aim of social evolution is the development of social efficiency. They really mean that society has made man what he is, that it has not merely somewhat shaped him, but that it has conferred his entire intellectual and moral nature and given to his physical the grace and beauty, combined with strength, we find in the best types of the Aryan race. If the influences which, acting through a long period, raised the brute-like creature who fought for existence with other brutes to so high a level, they contend that indefinite development is possible by the continuous operation of such influences. The hypothesis has to be proved, but both hypothesis and conclusion lie behind every discussion on society from the point of view of biological sociology.

I submit that an appeal to the lowest forms of existing savage life lays the action in the wrong court. Mr. Spencer would be as well entitled to call as a witness of social development an anthropoid ape as a low type of savage. Not that I mean in the slightest degree that there is not an impassable chasm between the two, but the savage has no voice in history, and this is my court. The testimony which history receives is that of the men who made it, and the life of the human race is within the province of history and that alone. If it can be proved that a Bushman or a Polynesian, moulded and rounded by social action and reaction, developed into a Shakespeare or a Cæsar, I shall without faces drink the chalice of absurdity which Comte presents in his deified personification of humanity.

The earliest monuments give types of man equal to the best

specimens of our day. In physical development, whether we regard strength or beauty, the Greeks more than twenty centuries ago have not been surpassed. The philosophers and statesmen of Greece afford evidence of power in the exercise of the speculative and practical intellect which can compete with the best exertions of modern philosophical and political thought. The drama of that people is only rivalled by the one towering genius of the Elizabethan era. Thirty centuries have produced nothing like the *Iliad*.

Possibly much of the reasoning relied upon to prove the evolution of society in the sense of human advancement is based on assuming that a high state of civilization means a highly complex society. Nothing could be more complex than the Oriental caliphate into which the Eastern Empire degenerated in the centuries before its fall. Yet what has it left behind in policy, in art, in literature, comparable to the achievements of the best days of Greece and of the Augustan age of Rome? Yet the Byzantine Empire was in the most special and immediate sense the heir of both. Again, society, whether in a "primitive" or "complicated" form—the opposition is always so expressed—is treated as the power which conferred on man his intellectual and moral nature. There can hardly be a doubt of this if the theory is correctly represented by stating that evolutionists maintain that biological laws brought an irrational animal to a stage at which he became a social one, then an ethical one, next a pious one, so reverencing his dead ancestors as first to worship them and finally to graft upon that worship the "fungoid growth" of a belief in a God eternal and omnipotent, the creator and conservor of all things. It amounts to this unless we agree to efface the evidence of all antiquity that religion was a great social and political power and that it was such a power because it supplied the last sanction to decrees of conscience. The worship of ten thousand gods does not contradict the great central fact implied in the belief of a superior God—that there was a first cause, not in the sense of the great agnostic Lucretius who, despite his unbelief, had a fear that there might be a power to rule the

varied course of the white stars,<sup>1</sup> and which would be too strong for men—but in the sense of the God who said let there be light, and whose angel spoke in the thunders of Sinai.

It must be understood that I am not putting forward opinions in favor of any religion or of any particular school of philosophy. I am only suggesting the possibility that certain facts have not been duly considered by writers on society who take their inspiration from certain eminent physiologists. I maintain, however, that facts in the history of life, though found in the moral plane, are at least of equal value with inductions made from any order of physical phenomena, human or extra-human. The great activity in pursuing phenomena of society and facts of individual human nature relating to them is unquestionably due to difficulties which compelled men to direct their attention to social problems. It appears to me that efforts to hide or put away this specter—this intellectual taskmaster—when made by men purposing to guide others in such inquiries, must end in barrenness of result. A few years spent in the study of social science, the world still staggering on blindly, then if not a cataclysm, a new literary or scientific craze. Fiddling while the city burns, will be the legend on the medal commemorating the era of sociology, unless sociologists grasp or try to grasp the only realities in the form and substance of society.

What is there in this day which gives assurance that problems of society never before existed, never before were dealt with? It is the superlative egotism of the nineteenth century patronizing all antecedent ages that assumes no other time could possibly be vexed by social troubles. There have been difficulties always more or less menacing; the only difference between them and the problems of today is that these are articulated by a greater variety of organs. To a large extent the history of the Roman commonwealth, to the genuine student, is one of such problems. That they are not to be found in greater number and virulence in mediæval history is, I submit, due to the prevailing

<sup>1</sup> *Nequæ forte deum nobis immensa potestus sit. vario motu quæ candida sidera verset.*

sentiment of European society from the seventh century, resting on the principle, doctrine or dogma, I care not what it is called, of common brotherhood with the Lord Christ—that well being was the right of every child of Adam.

The fact is that all these difficulties are really economic. I do not mean that bread and the circus would satisfy all the restless spirits of Europe and America, but if they were within the reach of all, there would be no problems to be solved. What is the meaning of social progress as the best interpreters of the phrase expound it but an effort to secure more points of contact with the earth by enlarging the social environment? That, in a nutshell, is the story of every social struggle from the earliest recorded time. It is immaterial whether the pressure sprang from the operation of class privileges or trade privileges, or monopolies of natural agents, or the excessive growth of population with respect to the land, or in other words, whether it was due to advantages founded in violence, or policy, or law, every difficulty since Hesiod's soul was wrung with the evil of the "later days" upon which he had fallen, resulted from the undue advantages possessed by a small number in the state. It is simply an arbitrary changing of the meaning of words to say such difficulties are other than economic.

The general features of social struggle in the societies of different times are the same. There is evidence of dissatisfaction in Hesiod writing eight centuries before our Lord, which has its echo in the latest pessimism. The time is out of joint, is a cry that has gone out from tired and finely-touched spirits thinking of the evils around them in every age we know of and must have expressed itself in times of which we have no record, but I cannot fancy the sound going up from the heavy-burdened heart of that last anthropoid which, as we are told, turned his "sad, dumb eyes" to heaven and became a man. I take the poets of antiquity as witnesses for facts of society whether in relations of courtesy, or of duty, of friendship or enmity, whether in the picturing of private life or public solemnity, or in the expression of orderly life in customs, laws, police, and I find that I can con-

struct out of these materials states or societies in which men and women could live who possessed every quality that our century would accord to the most perfect representatives of the sexes. It is more than conceivable that in Homer's time there were types like Achilles in which the national character was largely reflected. It must have been the fact that there were traditions of such characters which Homer only touched with that shaping spirit of imagination which gives the highest truth to forms it bodies forth. Take one of the naked, forked creatures, whom Mr. Spencer would draw out of his savage life in South Sea Islands or under the torrid zone of Africa or from Terra del Fuego, and compare him with the hero of the Iliad. As well compare him with Godfrey of Bouillon, Francis I, Bayard, Sir Philip Sidney, Ignatius of Loyola, with any man who realized in any degree one's conception of the Christian gentleman. The Iliad reflects how men thought and felt more than ten centuries before our era; and this way of looking at things, judging about them, are most material facts if it be contended that social evolution was the moulding hammering instrument which made the poor, wretched, wandering savage the being whom Hamlet describes so finely.

When Hesiod laments that he was born in the fifth age it is the fierce anguish of a spirit like that of Lucretius nearly ten centuries later, who railed at gods powerless to remedy the evils under which the world was dying. I contrast the opening lines of the seventh book of *Paradise Lost*, where Milton, with a weak regretfulness, implicitly recalls the memory of better days for himself, with Hesiod railing at the unkind influences which reserved him for the Iron Age—the age of fraud and masterful oppression. There was a partial revival of the spirit of the Age of Gold, when the great league against Troy for a principle quickened the dead or sleeping virtues of king and churl. It was a crusade of the Heroic Age and reacted on all the societies of Grecian ancestry or name.

This, I think, would bear a little analysis even though I should be compelled to pass over some other matters in refer-

ence to the notion I am trying to present, that society has been the preserver of man in the enjoyment of his higher nature, and not the creator of the higher nature. In other words, that when he first exists he is not a degraded savage or transmuted ape, and unquestionably we do not find him to be ape or savage in any remains in writing or building that show his presence in the dawn of history.<sup>1</sup>

Hesiod's lamenting his birth in the Age of Iron and describing in terms of deep enthusiasm the golden, offers two points for consideration. The evil time he lived in was one of economic difficulty; the other age was the tradition of a period free from social problems. The fact of a tradition is evidence for all it carries or for a greater or less amount of it according to the value of the subject and the care taken in the delivery of it from generation to generation. Going up to the Golden Age from that of Iron we enter the penumbral Heroic Age which, as has been suggested, was a partial revival of the virtues of the golden one. We pass through the luminous darkness of that time into the Bronze Age, a period of fierce, strong men who remind one of the "mighty hunter" who first established military despotism. But before this dark Age of Bronze, when chiefs and rulers fought and robbed like mediæval barons twenty-five centuries later, there was the Age of Silver when men lived happily and enjoyed length of days, but this age, toward its close, was setting in the spirit of impiety and war in which the Bronze Age opened. The Golden Age he describes as one when men lived as the gods, with no sickness or sorrow or decay until death came like sleep. This evidence of a high moral, social and physical nature cannot be obscured. It is there, it speaks with no uncertain sound, it is not like the footprint of a savage in a river bed, the finding of an arrowhead on the gravel beneath a bog, of a stone hatchet in a cave, or of the bones of some extinct species of deer mingled with those of some long-forgotten hunter.

What Hesiod's notion was concerning the virtues of the

<sup>1</sup> The traces found under circumstances apparently only consistent with a long history of man in a savage state do not affect my line of treatment.

primal man—the virtues of the Golden Age—we gather in some degree from his saying that men lived like the gods, but we gain it more distinctly by reading into his wail for the lost time Homer's conception of the virtues which made men illustrious and woman the ornament and crown of man's life. As surely as every writer of a work of imagination holds the mirror for his own age to glass herself in, as surely as Dante crystallized his enemies in immortal scorn, or that the vast gallery of Shakespeare was taken from every phase of life that met in London; whether they were adventurers returned from buccaneering beyond the line where there was no peace, or soldiers of fortune from the continent, squires of parts or squires with homely wits, courtiers who climbed the dizzy ladder with bold hearts and watchful eyes, great nobles of stainless lives, such as are still to be found in England, they were all types of those whom he met or of whom he had been told by those who had met them:—as surely as this is true for those, so surely can the same be said for Homer's men and women. Such evidence for the cast and character of any period is as much to be relied upon as the testimony of a living witness about the men, the movements, the looks, the bustle of Wall street or the Stock Exchange.

But first, is the king a petty tyrant in the Homeric state, something like a Rhenish graf four centuries ago, or a Scotch noble up to the Revolution? Instead he is the guardian of the precedents or customs on which the rights of his subjects rest,<sup>1</sup> he is the vicegerent of the gods and must answer to them for an unjust judgment. In the stern controversy between him and Achilles, Agamemnon calls kings the shepherds of their people in proof that he should be careful of the lives of the host. The king has a council of ancients something like the *Aula Regia* of the Norman kings, and the people are entitled to meet in public assembly like the meetings that heard Demosthenes when the herald called upon him on that supreme occasion when no other dared to “fulmine over Greece to Macedon.”

<sup>1</sup> These are the “old customs” to which men constantly appeal when resisting acts of oppression and on which what are called natural rights are based.



I must conclude with the regret that I could not give my estimate of the character of Achilles as Homer made him. He possesses the beauty which the Greek love of man united with the gifts of heroism and intellect. He speaks with the power of the magnificent demagogues of a later age. He can be soft and graceful like a troubadour knight in some castle of Provence, and over him is the shadow of his early death which you see, as it was said the fate of Charles of England was seen in the brow and eyes that haunt you from the canvas of Van Dyke. I should like to analyze the man of many wiles and to reproduce the maidens and matrons whom the blind old bard has drawn, to prove that family life was a holy thing while some influence, though an impaired one from the unseen world, yet rested upon this; but I have suggested something to show that there may be a side of the story of life different to that fashioned by biological sociology.

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